

LOOPING THE LOOP OVER LONDON

BY JANE ANDERSON

(Mrs. DEEMS TAYLOR)

IN a British military aeroplane, painted black, and especially designed for pursuing Zeppelins at night, I flew across London and, at a height of 7,000 feet, looped the loop over Hyde Park.

I was permitted to make this flight, to start from one of Britain's finest aerodromes and see, spread in a clear colored panorama one mile and a half below me, the houses and the streets of the greatest city in the world.

In the great field from which I started the turf was broken by patches of black mud and the grass was beaten down by the heavy rain of the morning. Overhead a light mist hung above the roofs of the hangars. It was not an auspicious day for flying.

But, on the wooden runway, with her wheels blocked and her black 'planes silhouetted against the sky, a biplane was waiting. She was beautiful—this machine. There was power in the sweep of her wings; there was power in the shining blades of her propeller. She rested, motionless, with the light on her wires and the black oval of her fuselage, with her nose facing toward the white circle which marked the centre of the field. But she had been built for preying, for spoliation, for that lawful destruction which is war.

Her two Lewis guns, of blue steel, were mounted on galvanized brackets; they were particularly businesslike—these guns. But it was not her black, compact fuselage, it was not her machine guns, which set her apart irrevocably for the purposes of war, for the purposes of death. It was, instead, an emblem painted on the under side of her upper surface. It was painted in pure white, this emblem. The lines of it were clean and broad. It was a death's head. Skull and crossbones.

It was a bit startling, this. I knew that in five minutes I was going to be sitting staring up at this pleasant symbol, with several thousand feet of good country air below me, and I was not consoled.

I looked at it. I had to. "Oh, that," said the major, and he made a large and eloquent gesture toward the dozen or more machines marked in like fashion, "means that she's brought down a Zeppelin on her own."

And so in one moment I plumbed the significance of official statements. And this by the smile of one major, R. F. C. Then I climbed aboard and was strapped in. The observer's seat, where I sat, was a wide seat, and the fuselage formed my arm rest. There was plenty of foot space. Captain X, who was my pilot, got into his seat behind me. To my right and above me the death's head looked on.

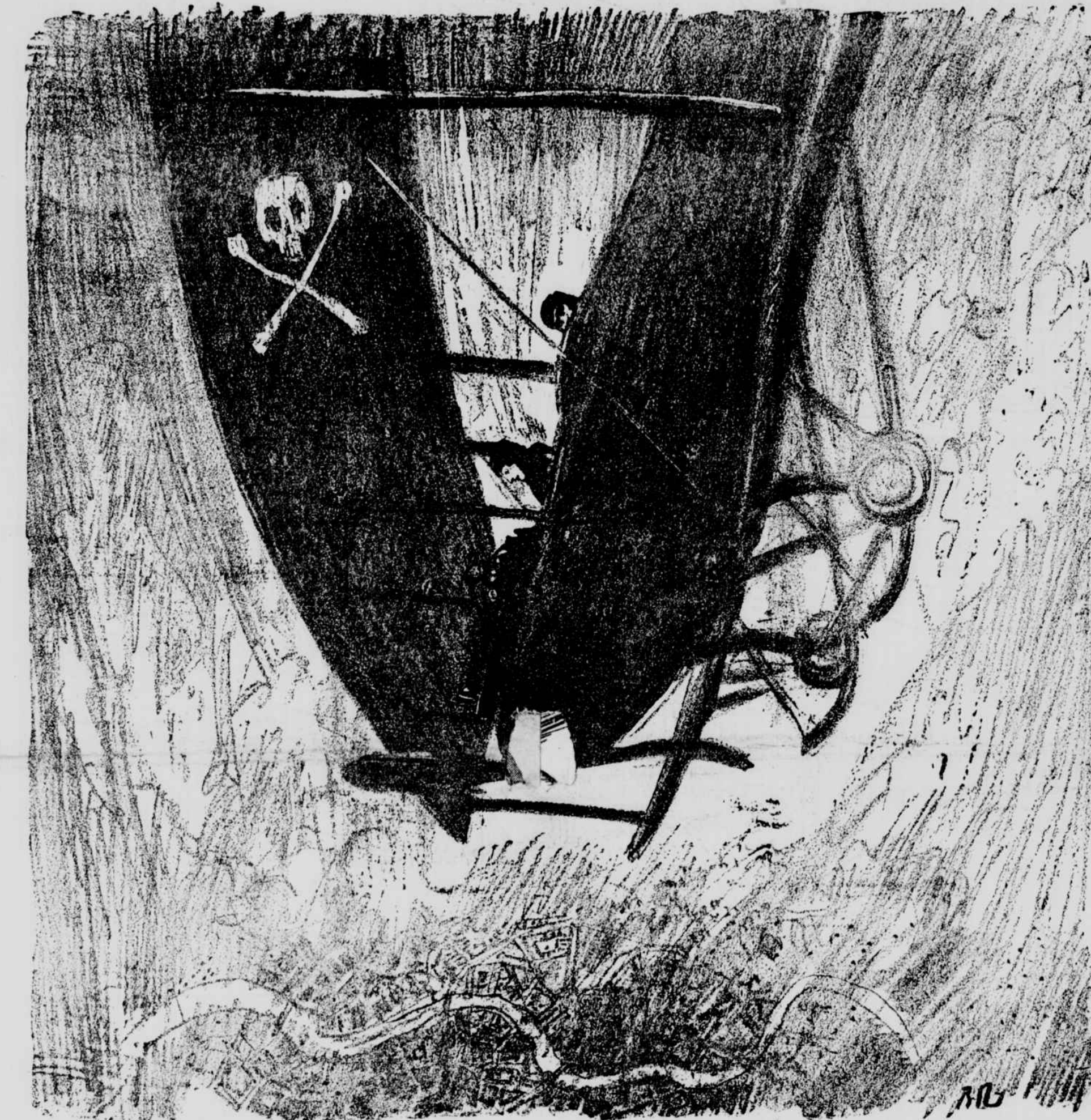
We circled the field, headed into the wind and were off.

I mean, we dived up into the sky. Now, I have seen getaways; that is, I have watched the smooth and tranquil lifting of machines from the earth and the steady, upward climbing into the clouds.

But we didn't do this. When we left the ground we left it. It was good climbing. It was good and stiff. The black nose of the biplane pointed straight to the sun. I saw, swiftly, visions of a stalled motor, of a rapid backward slide. But this was because I didn't know the true quality of our motor. Running steadily and smoothly, she pulled us up toward the white bank of cloud, above the sheds. Then, after a slow, circular climb, Captain X turned her toward London.

Below us the roofs of the hangars dropped away, and I saw, over the whirling propeller, the great curve of the Thames—the wide, splendid sweep of gray water, spanned by bridges. On one side were green fields and trees; on the other I could see the gray roofs of scattered houses. I saw even the windows—small, dark squares. In a road running through a meadow I watched two men walking, one of them a little in advance of the other.

Where two streets met there was a house with a red roof—a big house set a little apart from a long row of cottages. While I looked at this red roof



Seven Thousand Feet Above Hyde Park, an American Girl Looked Straight Ahead and Saw "the Roof of the Sky" from England's Finest Warplane

the color of it changed; from a clear vermilion it became mauve—one small, clear square of mauve.

I turned a little to look at the two men who were walking down the road. They had stopped moving; they had grown smaller.

I looked again at the big house with the red roof. But it had merged with the line of little cottages; it no longer stood apart with a strip of green separating it from its neighbors. These were no longer small cottages, close together, and another house near by. There was only one unbroken roof, one clear line of color. I had come up 6,000 feet above a little village which is on the outskirts of London.

The two men in the road had gone. I saw, far below me, the white roads, crossing and recrossing, and the bright green of the fields. But there were no longer any people; there were no longer trams and 'buses and motors. Only an hour before I had passed through this village; I had passed men and women in the streets; I had seen the flat meadows beside the river, with their carpet of buttercups. But I looked down over the edge of a black 'plane and I saw only a great checkerboard of green and white and, in places, narrow lines of Indian red and mauve.

In this swift, upward climbing there was no sense of rising. Before me the blades of the propeller were flashing even in the gray light; on either side were the wide, black wings, steady, miraculously solid. I was filled with a sense of security; for reasons of its own the face of the earth elected to change its contours, to assume new colors, to permit its sloping hills to level themselves, to become one with the little blue valleys—to make of the broad Thames a narrow ribbon of silver.

And from above I watched this. I saw the roads, the broad, smooth roads of England, become white threads on a clear background of green; from certain centres they reached out, spreading, then

converging anew. They were extraordinarily immaculate, these fine white threads, uniting England, confirming the solidarity of her villages.

Then I found that I had come into a bank of cloud. And, strangely enough, this white vapor increased, mysteriously, my sense of security. There was an extraordinary impression of solidity, of substance, after my journeying through the clear higher air. I watched, on the aluminum rim of the windshield, a row of clear drops, like beads, forming and reforming. The white cloud was condensing to make bright crystals for us, little opalescent chains that broke, then fashioned themselves anew.

The mist in front of me cleared and

the white vapor became transparent.

I looked down. Below I saw, in one vast, endless cyclorama, the roofs and gray streets of a city, with a river bounding them. The roofs were a deep, lustreless purple. In the distance I saw a little gray disk, faintly outlined. This was St. Paul's. I was flying above the city of London.

I thought for a moment that it was not true; that I, because of one man who was piloting me through certain uncharted spaces above the world, was not leaning over a little rim of painted iron and staring down at the greatest of great cities; that those fine lines of purple which we saw were not houses in which people lived, houses in which people worked, houses where men and women fulfilled the appointed round of small incidents which make up the story of the world; that in those small houses there were people who were fighting a great war; that there were tragedy and suffering and hope and courage and faith down there.

Then I believed suddenly that I was flying above London. I watched the edge of the 'plane passing over the city, as if it were pushing back evenly street after street and row after row of gray buildings. And there came into my mind without preface what enormous

industry had gone into the making of one city—antlike industry. It was such patient labor, this marking up the earth with dwellings and spires and odd shaped heaps of stones and mortar. Tremendous! . . .

However, at this moment Captain X saw a cloud not too far above us and he started climbing again. I am not sure just how much that one particular cloud had to do with our sudden new ascent, but we went up there, just 7,000 feet above the city of London, and we jumped that cloud.

When we started I don't know what I thought we were going to do, but this is what we did—we bore down on that cloud, and when it was just before us, small, round, opaque, my pilot throttled his motor. We dropped. We dropped precipitately. It was rather a sensation, this sliding off down toward earth. And I missed the pleasant loud roar of the engine. We were driving a bit fast.

Then Captain X threw on the motor to full power and brought her back to an even keel. Then—we sailed up and hurdled the cloud. It was very well done.

After this we seemed to gather speed, for reasons unexplained; that is, when I put my hand out the wind drove harder against it, pushing it back. Below, suddenly, a big strip of green appeared in the heart of London. With that curious loss of a sense of distance and of motion which is legitimate enough in flying, I did not know what this green square was. I had been watching the roofs, which seemed to have darkened as we progressed; in some places they seemed even to have wholly disappeared. There were whole blocks of roofless houses; they were like uncompleted cells in a hive.

But Captain X explained about the bit of green, with its little white paths, which was interrupting the gray streets of the city. First, he hammered on the iron casing of the fuselage; I turned around. He made a quick gesture, reaching out toward me. I didn't know what he wanted.

Then I saw that the captain was handing me a scrap of white paper, folded, about the size of a stamp.

It was a letter. It was not, however, a long letter. And there was, on one side of it, printing of a somewhat miscellaneous character. This, by error, I read first and could not understand it all.

Then I turned the paper over. Written on the other side of it, in pencil, were two sentences:

"We are over Hyde Park. Would you like to loop over London?"

I turned so that I could see him, and nodded.

Would I like to loop over London?

Did I want to loop over London, in one of the finest of England's warplanes? Did I want to loop over Hyde Park at a height of 7,000 feet? Yes, I did.

The machine plunged headlong toward the earth. The motor was running full blast. The world rushed up to meet us. I found myself staring at the nose of the machine, which was straight above me. Her piston rods, a row of them on either side, were dancing up and down briskly. I saw them, and I saw the roof of the sky—yet I had not moved. I was still sitting, staring straight ahead. Only I was staring at the sky, instead of the earth.

Everything was moving. Hyde Park wasn't where it ought to have been. The sky was not right. The nose of the machine was over my head. All wrong.

Then a slice of the earth dislodged itself and, making circles, stood on end. And another section of earth rushed into it. I saw this myself. There were some trees mixed up in it. I don't know when this was. But I saw it all.

Afterward the nose of the machine came down in front of me, where it should have been. And the iron strip on it was shaking again and the two thin cables on my left were vibrating pleasantly. I looked over and assured myself that Hyde Park was down below. It was. I liked the world.

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THE MARK OF THE DEATH'S HEAD

From the day of the mediæval archer, who notched his crossbow, to the day of the Western bad man, who notched his gun, men have always sought to preserve some mark of military prowess, some tally of their victims. This war has not changed human nature. The modern military aviator, the only soldier who still fights single-handed, does not notch his gun; but he paints a death's head on the wing of his 'plane to show that he has vanquished his foe in open combat.